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# Language of addiction itself can hurt, advocates say

By **Felice J. Freyer** | GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 04, 2016

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Windia Rodriguez remembers the sting of the words hurled at her during a hospital stay a few years ago. “Crackhead.” “Addict.” Especially, she recalls the scorn in the voices that pronounced her “*just* an addict.”

“They treated me like I was beyond hope,” Rodriguez said.

But she found hope, and these days, free of drugs for four years, Rodriguez makes a point of adding two words to the standard salutation in her 12-step group. “I’m an addict,” she says, “in recovery.”

In so doing, Rodriguez, a Boston resident and regional coordinator for the Massachusetts Organization for Addiction Recovery, quietly adds her voice to those of researchers and advocates who want to rewrite the lexicon of addiction.

These advocates seek to excise language that blames or disparages the patient and replace it with medical terms free of judgment. They assert that commonly used words — “junkie,” “abuser,” even “substance abuse” and

“addict” — can discourage people from seeking help, induce health professionals to treat patients harshly, and exacerbate the stigma that bedevils people suffering from drug addiction.

“The biggest thing we trade in is hope,” said Dr. Barbara Herbert, Massachusetts chapter president of the American Society of Addiction Medicine, a confederation of doctors and other medical workers. “Our biggest enemy is hopelessness. That’s why I think language matters a lot.”

Those rebelling against common expressions follow in the footsteps of earlier activists who banished such terms as “cripple,” “mental retardation,” and “insane asylum.” But they face special challenges with addiction. Attitudes are fierce and entrenched, and agreement is lacking on which words are most harmful and which substitutes most apt.

It doesn’t help that the reviled terms “substance abuse” and “drug abuse” are embedded in the well-recognized titles of government agencies, nonprofits, and scientific journals. Or that a phrase such as “person with a substance use disorder” — often suggested as an alternative to “addict” or “drug abuser” — is both cumbersome and vague.

Michael Botticelli, director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, has been working to standardize federal communication about addiction and eliminate pejorative terms. “For a long time, we’ve known that language plays a huge role in how we think about people and how people think about themselves,” said Botticelli, adding that he raises the language issue in just about every talk he gives. “Words have to change so attitudes change.”

The words targeted by Botticelli and others run the gamut from obvious insults, such as “junkie,” to common expressions that many might not consider derogatory or that are often used by people in recovery.

To call addiction a “habit” is inaccurate, likening a life-destroying compulsion to nail biting. To say people are “clean” when not taking drugs implies they’re dirty when using. A “dirty urine” — a sample with evidence of drug use — carries the same implication. “I can’t think of a more telling example of judgmental terminology,” said Botticelli, former chief of Massachusetts’ Bureau of Substance Abuse Services. “We don’t say for a diabetic whose blood sugar spikes that they have a ‘dirty blood sugar.’ ”

But the words provoking the most contention are “addict,” because the word labels a person as a health condition, and “abuse” and “abusers,” because, some specialists say, these words affix blame on the sick and evoke some of the worst crimes, such as child abuse.

Dr. Kevin P. Hill, an addiction psychiatrist at McLean Hospital in Belmont, is especially disturbed by “addict” because it defines people by their illness.

“This person is much more than one illness,” he said.

Others can live with “addict” but reject “abuse.”

John F. Kelly, director of the Recovery Research Institute at Massachusetts

General Hospital, has been beating the drum against the words “abuse” and “abuser” for more than a decade.

“

*‘Words have to change so attitudes change.’*

In a 2009 study, Kelly asked 516 health care workers at a conference to read a paragraph about a man who was having difficulty complying with a court-ordered addiction-treatment program. Half received a paragraph describing the patient as a “substance abuser”; the other half read a paragraph describing the man as “having a substance use disorder.”

When asked questions about the treatment he should receive, those who thought of him as a “substance abuser” were much more likely to blame him for his difficulties and recommend punishment.

“This is one of the reasons people don’t seek treatment,” Kelly said. “Rather than seeing themselves as sick, they think they’re bad people. They feel ashamed and embarrassed.”

Last year, Kelly and Dr. Richard Saitz of Boston University School of Medicine traveled to Budapest for a meeting of the International Society of Addiction Journal Editors and persuaded the group to stop using the words “abuse” and “abusers” (except in the titles of the journals themselves).

Two less specialized and more prominent medical journals, the New England Journal of Medicine and the Journal of the American Medical Association, said they don’t have explicit policies on the words used in articles about addiction. But both said they avoid the word “addict” because it labels people.

Among major media outlets, The New York Times, the Associated Press, The Boston Globe, and National Public Radio said they had not been asked to change addiction terminology, had not discussed doing so, and have no policies addressing the issue.

What about federal agencies? The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The National Institute on Drug Abuse. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Any name changes would require an act of Congress.

Dr. Nora D. Volkow, director of the drug abuse agency, tried that more than a decade ago, proposing “the National Institute on Diseases of Addiction.” When that effort failed, Volkow moved on and today has more urgent priorities, she said.

Also, she doesn’t object to the word “abuse,” finding it useful in distinguishing a severe disorder from milder conditions. Volkow said she agrees with efforts to avoid derogatory terms but urges precision and clarity in choosing replacements.

Otherwise, she said, “you end up in a world of grayness, where it’s very, very difficult to communicate.”

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration is working on a project that might help, said chief of staff Tom Coderre. The agency has teamed with the National Academies of Science to study which words promote stigma and which alternatives hold meaning for the public.

“If we want more people to seek treatment and we want public policy makers to make treatment available,” Coderre said, “changing the lexicon is going to be really important.”

*Felice J. Freyer can be reached at [felice.freyer@globe.com](mailto:felice.freyer@globe.com).*

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SPOTLIGHT REPORT



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The driver was seen on camera slamming into the woman, stopping to look at her body on the street and then speeding away, prosecutors said.

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## Nearly 230 animals from Westport farm up for adoption

The animals include rabbits, chickens, geese, horses, fish, and one Tibetan Wild Ass. [MORE...](#)

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## Boston issues nearly 3,500 fines during move-in

On the bright side, no violations were written for "bat activity," which landlords have been cited for in previous years. [MORE...](#)

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## No, UMass isn't banning jokes about Harambe

A response from school officials about the deceased gorilla was prompted



by an e-mail sent by two resident assistants at the school. [MORE...](#)

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The transit agency's management is eyeing drivers, operations employees, and maintenance workers in the new push. [MORE...](#)

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Ten to 12 boys rushed into the store and stole more than 20 phones, police said. [MORE...](#)

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Freia David's smile, enthusiasm, and her daily hugs made the McDonald's in Needham more than just a restaurant. [MORE...](#)

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## Harvard dining hall workers preparing for strike

The union that represents the employees, whose contract expires Sept. 17, have been negotiating with the university for three months. [MORE...](#)

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## Keolis Commuter Services fires 6 employees for time card cheating

Keolis Commuter Services has fired six employees for cheating on their timecards, and three others remain under investigation for irregularities. [MORE...](#)

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## Phillips Exeter Academy under fire again for its handling of sexual misconduct allegations

When Michaella Henry told Phillips Exeter officials she had been sexually assaulted, officials didn't contact police. Instead, they offered baked goods. [MORE...](#)

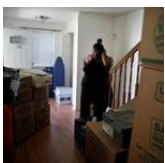
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## Snake? What snake? Triathlon will go on in Maine river

Rumors of a possibly 10-foot-long snake are just one small obstacle participants will face this weekend. [MORE...](#)

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## In Greater Boston, a lopsided geography of affordable housing

Relatively little subsidized housing has sprouted in places like

Lexington. [MORE...](#)

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## Chasing Bayla

Biologist Michael Moore had waited all day — really, all his life — for the whale to surface, the suffering giant he thought he could save, that science had to save. It had come down to this. [MORE...](#)

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## SJC ends lifetime parole supervision for sex offenders

A law that created “community parole supervision for life” for sex offenders was struck down by the state’s highest court. [MORE...](#)

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GLOBE SPECIAL REPORT

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## More height warning signs coming to Storrow

State officials say they plan to install more signs on Storrow and Memorial drives to warn motorists of the roadways’ height restrictions. [MORE...](#)

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## Plymouth wants its 150-pound lobster statue back



Some locals are offering a hefty reward for the return of “Sir-Loin,” a white-tiled sculpture with gold antennae. [MORE...](#)

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## Police head says he can assign body cameras to officers

William Evans testified Tuesday in a lawsuit filed by the union representing many Boston police officers. [MORE...](#)

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## In race for register of deeds, there are some who actually want to do the job

But the office is a magnet for longtime pols hoping to ride the twin waves of name recognition and apathy into a \$124,000-a-year sinecure. [MORE...](#)

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## Charter debate playing out in small races with big money

Charter school friends and foes, like the state’s teachers’ union, are spending relatively big bucks backing candidates who support their views. [MORE...](#)

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## 7 Democrats seek obscure office’s \$124,000 payday

There are 124,000 reasons the field is so crowded. [MORE...](#)

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## TV’s Wyatt Earp, Hugh O’Brian; at 91

Mr. O’Brian shot to fame playing the sheriff in what was hailed as television’s first adult Western. [MORE...](#)



## Commissioner will not back down from camera fight

Police Commissioner Evans testified he is determined to go forward with a plan to have 100 officers wear body cameras as part of a pilot program.

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## Ballot question on charter schools divides Democrats

State committee members will discuss the measure when they gather Tuesday night in Lawrence. [MORE...](#)



ADRIAN WALKER

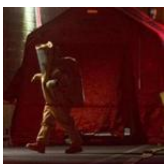
## Who will succeed Brian Joyce in the state senate?

The race pits Beacon Hill insider and staunch conservative Walter Timilty against Nora Harrington, a progressive businesswoman. [MORE...](#)



## The inside story of MIT and Aaron Swartz

More than a year after Swartz killed himself rather than face prosecution, questions about MIT's handling of the hacking case persist. [MORE...](#)



## Chemical exposure deaths on the job getting rarer

The death of a worker in a South Boston warehouse this week was “an extreme situation,” a researcher said. [MORE...](#)

## Closing time for New England's last HoJo's

The last Howard Johnson's restaurant in New England is scheduled to close



Tuesday. [MORE...](#)

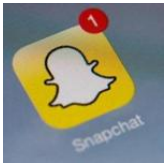
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## Uber driver charged with sexual assault

Judge Lisa Ann Grant released Michael Vedrine without bail and ordered him to stay away from his accuser. [MORE...](#)

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## Police seek person who solicited lewd pictures from boys in Weston

The high school's principal told students to inform a trusted adult if they received such a request. [MORE...](#)

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## Ruth Hubbard, 92, first woman tenured in biology at Harvard

Dr. Hubbard taught groundbreaking courses on biology and women's issues at the university in the 1970s. [MORE...](#)

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WHO TAUGHT YOU TO DRIVE?

## Four reasons why the car won't start

Sitting behind the wheel of a car that won't start (or crank) is never a good thing, particularly during winter. [MORE...](#)

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## A devastating mismatch: City vs. scofflaw landlords

Some of the giants in the student rental trade also lead the pack in code

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## **'I don't want anyone else to be alone,' Owen Labrie's victim says**

"I want other people to feel. . . strong enough to say 'I have the right to my body. I have the right to say no,'" Chessy Prout said. [MORE...](#)

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## **Nearly a century later, structural flaw in molasses tank revealed**

A study has shed new light on the Great Molasses Flood of 1919, finding that the tank was stressed well beyond capacity. [MORE...](#)

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## **How common are skydiving accident deaths? Not very.**

Despite two recent tragedies in Massachusetts resulting in three deaths, only 8 in a million skydiving jumps result in a fatality. [MORE...](#)

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## **Lowell police looking to ID mystery man in painting**

Police are guessing that the uniform is that of a high-ranking officer during the 1920s or 1930s. [MORE...](#)

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## **That snake skin in Maine? It's from an anaconda**

A snake skin found in Westbrook is "100 percent" an anaconda, but whether the skin actually belongs to the legendary "Wessie" is unclear.

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## City Council president, mayor at odds on marijuana referendum

Michelle Wu plans to endorse the state ballot push, a referendum Marty Walsh opposes. [MORE...](#)

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## Two more suspects arrested in connection with March murder

Two Quincy residents face charges in connection with the shooting death earlier this year of a 28-year-old man in Roxbury. [MORE...](#)



## A rattling surprise: Viper found outside Quincy home

The timber rattlesnake may have been searching for water during the drought and ventured into the neighborhood. [MORE...](#)



ON THE MOVE

## No dodging the weekly fun in Watertown gym

Socially and competitively, Boston Ski & Sport Club's year-round co-ed adult dodgeball league a big hit. [MORE...](#)



## State won't fault hospital that released man before fatal rampage

An investigation into Morton Hospital's release of Arthur DaRosa found that staff followed appropriate procedures. [MORE...](#)

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## Framingham teen allegedly stabbed mother, brother while vacationing in Florida



The 16-year-old allegedly left his younger brother with life-threatening injuries, and his mother in serious condition, police say. [MORE...](#)

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## Vase that drew \$1.7m bid also drawing federal scrutiny

The 18th-century Chinese vase from Altair Auctions of Norwood bears a resemblance to a modern reproduction auctioned off a year ago for just \$3,840. [MORE...](#)

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## Tales of animal abuse emerge at Westport farm

Livestock had been living in deplorable conditions for months, probably years, police said. [MORE...](#)

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## The Marblehead healer with the magic touch

Nancy Torgove Clasby knows there may be skeptics who don't believe in alternative healing. [MORE...](#)

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## Probation 2.0: How technology is changing probation work

More probation officers are using social media to check on offenders to make sure they are complying with court orders. [MORE...](#)

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## Courageous parents offer a hand to others

A Newton woman who lost a daughter to Tay-Sachs disease has started a group that supports parents whose children face life-threatening illnesses.

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## Workout booster contains banned stimulant, study finds

A popular sports supplement contains a banned substance derived from methamphetamine, according to tests conducted by Harvard Medical School researchers. [MORE...](#)

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PART ONE OF TWO

### For Richard family, loss and love

They had to be in that Boylston Street crowd on Marathon Day, cheering passing runners. The horror that followed, and their quiet courage in the face of it, will bind Boston's hearts to theirs, forever. [MORE...](#)

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### Mass. beekeepers abuzz at the sting of proposed state plan

Thousands of beekeepers say the proposal fails to curb the use of harmful pesticides. [MORE...](#)

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### Annie Dookhan pursued renown along a path of lies

The former chemist finally found fame, as scandal engulfed the state drug lab. [MORE...](#)

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### Syrian refugees face pushback in Vt.

City aldermen are fighting controversial resettlement of an estimated 100 refugees in Rutland, Vermont. [MORE...](#)

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## Coast Guard vessel returns to Boston after rescuing 100 Cuban migrants

During the ship's 70 days at sea, the crew found and cared for more than 100 Cuban

migrants attempting to sail to America. [MORE...](#)

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## More than 20 overdose deaths hit Middlesex in 3 weeks

Seven people died in the county from drug overdoses in the past week and 65 deaths have been recorded this year. [MORE...](#)

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BARNSTABLE

## Pedestrian struck on Route 6 near Barnstable

A pedestrian was struck on Route 6 westbound Saturday morning, closing the right travel lane near Exit 6. [MORE...](#)

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## Great White's frontman has struggled with fire's legacy

Jack Russell, 52, has fallen a long way since that night 10 years ago when he preened before a packed house in The Station nightclub. [MORE...](#)

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## The MBTA excuse generator you've been waiting for is here

Two friends have launched an online "excuse generator" that spits out made-up, funny excuses for MBTA delays. [MORE...](#)

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## David Ortiz's image carved in to Sterling corn maze

Davis Mega Maze is honoring the retiring Red Sox legend as the theme of this year's puzzle. [MORE...](#)

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## South Coast rail could cost \$1b more than estimated



Consultants for the MBTA have raised their cost estimates for the project to extend commuter rail service to New Bedford and Fall River. [MORE...](#)

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## Mass. agencies often limit access to records

Government agencies routinely take months to respond and insist that records considered public in other states are confidential. [MORE...](#)

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## 7 years after stroke, paralyzed woman awarded \$35m

A jury awarded Andrea Larkin, who was paralyzed from a stroke that she suffered after labor, \$35.4 million in a medical malpractice lawsuit.

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## City Hall not open to all, lawyer's rise suggests

It's hard to believe Mayor Marty Walsh's claim that fast-rising lawyer Sean O'Donovan isn't getting special treatment. [MORE...](#)

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## Flooding, hail seen amid storms in Boston area

Flooding was especially heavy west of Boston on Saturday, with instances reported in Natick, Framingham, and Worcester. [MORE...](#)

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## Strange visitor from the South (a manatee) is spotted off Cape Cod

At least a half-dozen sightings have been reported since mid-August of a manatee that probably ambled up the East Coast from Florida. [MORE...](#)



## A partially restored Mayflower II returns to Plymouth

More upgrades are planned before the 400th anniversary of the original ship's landing. [MORE...](#)



## Climate change could be even worse for Boston than previously thought

A new report commissioned by the city says seas could rise more than 10 feet by the end of the century. [MORE...](#)



THOMAS FARRAGHER

## Collecting more than tolls on the Mass. Pike

As Pike toll booths are about to be demolished, with them will go a long and colorful history of the collection of highway coins. [MORE...](#)



## Silent for decades, underground theater set to be revived

Steinert Hall is one of the most intriguing secrets of the city. A new owner could restore it to its former glory. [MORE...](#)



## Route 1 miniature golf course to stay open for one more season

The giant orange dinosaur that towers over Route 1 in Saugus isn't going extinct quite yet. [MORE...](#)

## Researchers use black-market drug website to gauge public health



Anyone can visit StreetRx to learn about drug prices, and anyone can post information and rate the deals. [MORE...](#)

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## Mike Pence's daughter is a rising senior at Northeastern University

Audrey Pence will be a senior next semester at the school's College of Social Sciences and Humanities. [MORE...](#)

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KEVIN CULLEN

## It's no time to give humor a rest

The summer's over, and we're back to the grind. What better time for a few laughs? [MORE...](#)

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## St. Paul's parents helped fund Owen Labrie's defense

A prominent parent led an effort that raised over \$100,000 to fund a high-powered legal team, documents show. [MORE...](#)

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## Some parents are outsourcing this rite of childhood

Teaching a child how to ride a bike isn't what it used to be. Some parents don't know how to ride themselves. Others are too busy. Many can't take the whining. [MORE...](#)

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## Some rain and heavy seas as Hermine system fades

Forecasters say temperatures in Greater Boston will reach only into the 70s as rain continues Tuesday. [MORE...](#)

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## Nation's first 'microcollege' opens in Holyoke

A novel approach is focused on helping young, low-income mothers earn college degrees. [MORE...](#)

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## Police say they solved 2 crimes by tracking footprints

The fresh snow allowed police to track the footprints of alleged criminals in two cases, resulting in three arrests. [MORE...](#)

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## Walsh appoints special chronic homelessness adviser

Laila Bernstein has focused on homeless issues for the city for nearly two years and now says she plans to "scale up" efforts. [MORE...](#)

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## Carbon emissions rising at New England power plants

The revelations are a setback to the state's legally mandated efforts to reduce greenhouse gases. [MORE...](#)

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## Petitioners say judge should lose job over sex assaulter's probation

Judge Thomas Estes recently sentenced a teenager to probation for sexually assaulting





two classmates in April. [MORE...](#)

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## Long hours, little pay, no vacation for delivery drivers

The job of delivering newspapers has become a nocturnal marathon for low-income workers on the edge of the economy. [MORE...](#)

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## Trial in teen's suicide could begin in December

A 19-year-old Plainville teenager faces allegations that she persuaded a friend to kill himself despite his wavering on whether to carry out the act.

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